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ABSTRACT

Memorization and recitation of dialogues are an important part of English as a second language (ESL) courses. However, if the goal of using dialogues is to promote free conversation, the practice of reciting dialogues must entail more than the rote memorization of another's thoughts. Therefore, the talk-and-listen method is a good technique for practicing dialogue without causing undue boredom in the adult basic education ESL classroom. The key features of the talk-and-listen method are as follows: dialogue is not memorized; learners become familiar with the vocabulary; the teacher introduces the context and models pronunciation of sentences; learners practice in pairs; the speaker in each group looks at a line of dialogue, looks up at the listener, and speaks; and the listener must keep his or her eyes on the speaker while he or she is speaking. (MN)

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND DIALOGUE CONSTRUCTION IN ESL

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Introduction

Second-language research has shifted its focus in the past decade away from what the language presents to the learner (e.g., phonology, morphology, or syntax) to what the learner brings to the language (e.g., attitudes, needs, interests, or creativity). Learning objectives are both communicative competence (rules) as well as performance competence (use). The avoidance of errors "at all costs" has given way to the notion that errors are a sign that the learner is trying out a personal hypothesis of what the language is like at that point and that the learner is creating and adjusting a cognitive map of the language in the process. In this way, learners are involved both psychologically and linguistically in their own learning.

Conversation in the Classroom

When conversation is in progress, both the speaker and the listener focus on the message; however, a major cause of boredom in the classroom may be that the teacher and student have nothing important to say to each other. Therefore, it is advisable that the learner participate in the shaping of the message to assume responsiblity and interest in seeing that it is properly delivered and received. Classroom language should be "real" or "realistic." Real language is true at the time and in the context in which it is used: For example, "John, will you close the door, please?" Realistic language is appropriate to a context that the learner sees as a possibility in the future: For example, "I wish I had a new car."

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Dialogue for Ordering Breakfast

Student 1: Good morning. Would you like coffee?

Student 2: Yes,
- black, please.
- with cream, please.

Student 1: Here you are. Ready to order?

Student 2: Yes, I would like
- two eggs with
- pancakes with

with
- bacon.
- sausage.
- ??

and
- blueberry syrup.
- strawberry syrup.

Student 1:
- How do you want your eggs?
- The regular stack?

Student 2:
- Fried, please.
- No, I'll have the short stack?

Student 1: Here you are. Anything else?

Student 2:
- No, that's all.
- Yes, _____.

Student 1: Would you like your coffee warmed up?
Student 2: Yes, thanks.

Dialogue for Discussing Health Matters

Student 1: Do you have a
- check-up
- physical
- physical exam

every year?

Student 2:
- Yes, I do because my job requires it.
- No, I don't.
- ??

What about you?

Student 1: _____.
Are you on medication of any kind?

Student 2:
- Yes, I take medication for _____.
- No, nothing on a regular basis.
- ??

How about you?

Student 1: _____.
Do you take vitamins?

Student 2:
- Yes, I do.
- No, I don't.

What about you?

Student 1: _____.

Dialogue Considerations and Construction

Memorization of dialogues has been a long-standing staple of language classes in the United States. It has been advocated as a good way to present the learner with correct language structure as well as the opportunity to ingest a slice of error-free language. If the goal of dialogue use is to promote free conversation, there must be more than rote memorization of another's thoughts. In constructing a dialogue the following considerations are important: Is the topic useful for the learner? With whom will this topic be discussed because we do not speak the same with all people? What is the level of linguistic knowledge of the learner?

The amount of structure in a dialogue may vary. Dialogues can be strictly controlled in terms of learner responses, or they may allow the learner a wide range of options. If there are no options at all, then the dialogue is referred to as mechanical. Learner creativity and interest are engaged, and conversation becomes more meaningful as more control of the response is passed to the student.

The "talk and listen" method is a good technique for practicing dialogue. The guidelines for this method are:

1. The dialogue is not memorized.
2. Learners have become familiar with the vocabulary.
3. The teacher introduces the context and models pronunciation of sentences.
4. Learners practice in pairs. All learners in the classroom practice at the same time.
5. In each pair, the speaker looks silently at a line of dialogue, looks up at the listener, and speaks. If the line is too long to remember, then the speaker may say part of the line, pause to look at the dialogue, look up at the listener again, and complete the line.
6. During this time the listener will look at the speaker and listen. The listener may not look at his/her part while waiting to respond.

Suggestions five and six are not easy with which to comply; however, communication will improve as the method is perfected. The dialogues in this lesson can serve as examples of the format for using this method. They should be adjusted to fit your students and their needs in terms of topic, level of linguistic difficulty, vocabulary, cultural information, conversation strategies, polite expressions of asking and declaring, and vocabulary expansion through synonym choice.